DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 873 PS 018 935

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TITLE Parents' Perceptions of the Moral Environment in Choosing Their Children's Elementary Schools.
PUB DATE Nov 88
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Moral Education (Pittsburgh, PA, November 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Catholic Schools; Community Characteristics; Community Surveys; *Criteria; Cultural Differences; Elementary Education; *Enrollment Influences; Interviews; *Moral Issues; *Parent Attitudes; Parent Responsibility; Public Schools; *School Choice; *School Location

ABSTRACT

This paper, based on neighborhood surveys and in-depth interviews with parents in Syracuse, New York, argues that the location of schools is a major factor in parents' school choice. It notes that this position is contrary to previous research. Parents' concerns with location reflect their concerns about moral environments for child rearing. Findings suggest that a major parental responsibility is the managing of their children's moral environment outside the home. Parents used four strategies regarding school enrollment: (1) living in a good neighborhood with a good school; (2) selecting a Catholic school to compensate for the limitations of a neighborhood; (3) remaining in a low-income neighborhood and fighting undesirable influences on children; or (4) selecting a school on the basis of its cultural diversity. Most parents managed the moral environment by means of the first strategy. While families in four neighborhoods indicated that they had acted according to this strategy, families in a fifth expressed a desire to do so, but were constrained by limited incomes. Additional findings regarding Catholic schools and cultural diversity are discussed. Concluding remarks concern the reinterpretation of previous findings and implications for parents, school staff, and policymakers. Material on the survey design is appended. (RH)

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Parents' Perceptions of the Moral Environment in Choosing Their Children's Elementary Schools

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prepared for presentation at
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November, 1988

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Abstract

Parents' perceptions of the moral environment of neighborhoods and schools have helped shape the residential and school enrollment patterns of American cities. The most important research study of parent choice of school, conducted by the Rand Corporation in the Alum Rock Unified School District of San Jose, California, found that "location" was the most frequently cited consideration in parents' school enrollment decisions, but dismisses this consideration as "simplistic and educationally irrelevant." Based on neighborhood surveys and indepth interviews with parents in Syracuse, New York, this paper argues to the contrary, that location is very relevant because it reflects parents' concerns regarding moral environments for child-rearing. Parents feel responsible for the moral behavior of their children, and they make housing and school decisions, to the extent possible, that ensure that their children will grow up in positive moral environments. Bronfenbrenner's "ecology of human development" theory, which emphasizes the importance of the child's face-to-face interactions in specific settings within the broad context of social institutions and culture, provides a theoretical framework for understanding parent concerns and choices. Evidence from the Alum Rock study suggests that environments could well have been perceived by parents as different in that community as well, though this was not considered in Rand's data collection and analysis. This study suggests the importance of community dialogues which focus on clarifying moral issues, rather than leaving parents to make decisions which could incorporate tacit assumptions based on race or social class.

Introduction

Many parents, especially but not only those in urban areas, have opportunities to choose what schools their children will attend. They may consider schools in their decisions about where to live. They may choose between public and private schools. And, in some communities, they may take advantage of alternative or magnet schools or voluntary transfer plans. In taking advantage of such opportunities, parents have been particularly sensitive to the moral environment of both neighborhoods and schools. Their perceptions of these environments have been a major factor in shaping the residential and school enrollment patterns of American cities.

While this conclusion may seem obvious to some, it was not at all obvious to me when I began the research study described in this paper. On the contrary, when I first began collecting data for this study, I believed that some parents' decisions were based on racial and/or class bias. I shall return to that issue later in this paper.

First, however, I would like to review briefly two related studies, both from the Rand Corporation. Next, I will describe my own research findings. Based on these findings, I will offer my reinterpretation of the data from the Rand studies. I will conclude with implications for further research, for policy and for practice. A detailed description of my research design is contained in Appendix A.

Prior Research on Parent Choice of School:

While my research has implications for a number of research areas, including moral education, I view it primarily in relation to the policy research on parent choice of school. Leaving aside the research on voluntary methods of school desegregation (e.g. magnet schools), this is a relatively small body of research. It seems especially so when viewed in relation to the amount of controversy generated over tuition tax credits, educational vouchers and public schools of choice plans. Today, I would like to focus on just two studies, both from the Rand Corporation, which I regard as the two most important studies in this field.

There's a saying in the real estate business that the three most important factors in selling a house are location, location and location. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the three most important factors in parental choice of school, according to the Rand Corporation's study of the Alum Rock Public School Voucher Demonstration Project, are also location, location and location.

The Alum Rock Unified School District, on the east side of San Jose, California, serves a predominantly low income community with a Mexican-American majority. In the early 1970's, Alum Rock was chosen by the U. S. Office of Economic Opportunity for a test of an educational voucher proposal developed by the Center for the Study of Public Policy. CSPP's voucher plan was intended to promote competition among both public and private schools for students, but compromises made to obtain agreement from all concerned resulted in what was in reality a public alternative schools model. The first year, six of the twenty-four elementary and middle schools in the district participated in the demonstration, increasing to thirteen schools in the second year. Each of these schools offered a range of content and instructional alternatives through two or more mini-schools.

When Alum Rock parents were asked why they enrolled their children in the schools that they did, 70.9% mentioned "location" as a factor. Program features were a very distant second, at 32.0%, closely followed by family and friendship ties at 30.8%. General school characteristics were mentioned by 18.9% of those questioned, followed by references to principals and teachers by 18.0% of parents.

In their final report on parent choice at Alum Rock, Rand researchers Gary Bridge and Julie Blackman (1978) described "location" as a "simplistic and educationally irrelevant" consideration, adding in a footnote that "no theory of learning that we know of would say that the school location per se has an impact on learning." In an article on post-secondary education entitlement programs in School Review that same year, Bridge asked, with reference to prospective voucher holders, "will they invest in education that improves their economic leverage in the labor market, or will they buy the educational equivalents of junk food, easy to consume but lacking in substance?" In part on the basis of evidence from Alum Rock, Bridge argued that low-income, less educated individuals "are least likely to seek and process the information they need to make intelligent choices." Lacking such information, "they will make choices on educationally irrelevant grounds (e.g. emotional responses to hucksters' advertising)." Bridge concluded that educational entitlement programs "should not be implemented until effective policies to overcome information imperfections have been developed in experimental programs."

In contrast to Rand's Alum Rock researchers, Rand researchers Linda Darling-Hammond and Sheila Nataraj Kirby found that location played a very minor role in the decisions of Minnesota parents who considered more than one school at the time of current enrollment. Of these active choosers, only 5.8% of public school parents and no private school parents cited location as the most important factor in their decisions. In contrast, school quality was the most important consideration of 59.8% of public school parents and 43.5% of private school parents. hen asked to identify very important factors from a list of fourteen items, academic and discipline factors were chosen most frequently, while location ranked tenth among public school parents and eleventh among private school parents.

But active choosers at the time of enrollment made up only about one fourth of public school parents interviewed (25.7%) and about one third of private school parents (34.3%) of this study of parents in the Minneapolis-St. Paul Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area. In contrast, over half of the public school parents (53.1%) and a third of private school parents (35.0%) stated that they "had considered public school quality as an important factor in determining residential location." In the Minnesota study, then, the relationship of schools to residence is reversed from Alum Rock. According to Darling-Hammond and Kirby, school quality frequently influences residential choice, rather than residence influencing school choice.

It could be argued that this difference in study outcomes could be accounted for in terms of a difference in the socio-economic status of the parents interviewed. The median income and median parental education of the Minnesota sample are both above the national average, whereas the Alum Rock school district serves one of the poorest communities in California. I will attempt to demonstrate, however, that an entirely different explanation can account for the differing significance of "location".

Research Findings:

Neighborhood Enrollment Patterns:

The first step in my research study involved conducting a door-to-door survey in five predominantly white neighborhoods in the City of Syracuse, New York. Most parents are the grandchildren or great-grandchildren of immigrants from Italy, Ireland, Poland and Germany. Almost three-guarters of the families are Catholic. (See Figure 1 for a schematic map of these neighborhoods, and Appendix A for a detailed description of the study design).

"Canal Town," so named because it is located close to the former route of the Erie Canal, is one of the oldest sections of Syracuse. Some of the homes in this area are large, a few quite ornate, and have been targets of gentrification. The new urban gentry, however, are mostly childless and thus not involved with area schools. Most of the families in this area are low income (under $15,000), and the parents have not gone beyond high school, if they graduated at all. They are renters, and relatively mobile, though many of their moves are within the same neighborhood. Their houses are small and close together, at various stages of deterioration, yards are often tiny patches of bare dirt, if they can be said to exist at all. Most of the parents interviewed would prefer to live elsewhere, but cannot afford better housing. Control of their children is a major issue, although those parents who consented to be interviewed were, by their own accounts, more successful in this regard that many of their neighbors (See, for example, Ruth Ball, quoted below).

"Parkside" is a small enclave surrounded on two sides by Canal Town, on the third side by a city park and on the fourth side by a commercial area. As one rounds the corner from Canal Town into Parkside, the scene changes abruptly. Parkside houses are larger and better maintained, and most have yards that are quite large by urban standards, a few even allowing space for small gardens. Families here are home-owners, with incomes ranging from $15-40,000. Most parents have some post-secondary education. They describe Parkside as a good neighborhood, safe, comfortable, with neighbors you can count on in times of need.

Up the hill beyond the park is "Hilltop", a neighborhood similar in appearance and social composition to Parkside. Hilltop's primary characteristic is its proximity to "The Village" (see below). Hilltop residents look in that direction for shopping, community activities and schools, despite the fact that the former city boundary separates the two neighborhoods, Hilltop residents view their neighborhood as safe, secure, closeknit, a good place for raising children.

"The Village" was a separate, incorporated village until the 1920's, and still retains its own "Main Street" with a diversity of small businesses. Homes are larger and have larger yards than in Hilltop. Family incomes range from $20-50,000 and above. Most parents have attended college, and many have bachelor's degrees. The Village is regarded as a very family oriented neighborhood, with many community activities for children.

"The Acres" was a farm during much of the 19th Century. Later, it became the home of the city's Protestant elite. Houses are among the largest in the city, some of them including what were once servants' quarters on the third floor. Lawns are as large as those of many suburban homes. In recent years, many Catholic families have moved into the area as the former residents have moved to the more affluent suburbs. Family incomes are $50,000 and above. Most parents have bachelors degrees, but advanced degrees have been earned primarily by those in the professions. There are fewer community activities than in The Village, and privacy is highly valued by many residents.

Eisenhower Elementary School, located in Canal Town, serves a large attendance area which also includes Parkside and Hilltop. Hoover Elementary School is in The Village and Truman in The Acres. In addition, there are three Catholic schools in nearby areas, as well as one independent private school.

My survey of these neighborhoods was intended primarily for the purpose of identifying parents of elementary school students to be interviewed in depth in the second phase of the study. However, it also yielded important information about elementary school enrollment patterns in the five neighborhoods (see Table 1).

Table 1

1983-84

Elementary School Enrollment

by Neighborhood and School Type

Neighborhood Type	low income	lower middle income	middle & upper middle income	citywide*
Neighborhoods	Canal Town	Parkside & Hilltop	The Village & The Acres	
Neighborhood Public Schools	Eisenhower	Eisenhower	Hoover & Truman	
Neighborhood Enrollment by School Type				
- neighborhood public schools	62 %	7 %	63 %	49.33 %
- other public schools	25 %	40 %	6 %	29.28 %
- Catholic schools	10 %	50 %	21 %	> 21.39 %
- other private schools	3 %	3 %	10 %	
Total Number of Children Identified in Survey	71	67	89	13,408*

* Citywide data (from Syracuse City School District Research and Evaluation Report No. 9-85, "Enrollment Analysis 1980-84: School and Attendance Area") do not include children in self-contained special education classes and do not distinguish between Catholic and other private schools. Using Catholic school enrollment data, and assuming no net flow of Catholic school students across city lines, Catholic school students would account for about 17 % of total citywide elementary school enrollment, leaving about 4 % for other private schools.

At the time of the survey, just under 50% of city elementary school students attended their neighborhood public schools, just under 30% attended public schools in other neighborhoods (including two magnet schools), and slightly more than 20% attended Catholic and other private schools. In contrast to this citywide pattern, three distinct neighborhood enrollment patterns emerged from the survey.

In Canal Town, a higher than average proportion of students attended the neighborhood school (62%). The proportion in other public schools was slightly below average (25%), and in Catholic schools well below average (10%). The only students in other private schools were those placed there and paid for by the city for special education purposes.

A second pattern can be found in Parkside and Hilltop. In these neighborhoods, enrollment in the neighborhood school is far below the citywide average (only 7%), while a very high proportion of children attend Catholic schools (50%), and an above average proportion are in other public schools (40%). Other private schools account for close to the citywide average (3%).

Finally, a third pattern is evident in The Village and The Acres. There, enrollment was above average in the neighborhood public schools (63%), in Catholic schools (21%) and in other private schools (10%), but very much below average in other public schools (6%).

These very different neighborhood patterns of school enrollment have developed, I will argue, as a consequence of parents with a widely shared view of parental responsibilities having different opportunities and adopting different strategies to fulfill their responsibilities.

Parental Responsibilities:

Most parents (more especially mothers, since only about one third of the fathers were interviewed) believe that in the final analysis they are personally responsible for the welfare of their children. While parents' conceptions of what the welfare of their children entails vary in emphasis and specific details, there is a basic core of items from which few would dissent. These include physical safety, emotional security, adherence to certain standards of moral behavior, sociability and acquisition of knowledge and skills which will enable them to function successfully in the adult world. Each of these is important, and together they add up to a very holistic view of the child and a very diffuse set of parental responsibilities.

Furthermore, these parental role responsibilities are not limited to the home, but are also applicable wherever the child goes outside the home, even if the parent is not physically present. Parents feel responsible for the selection and monitoring of the other settings in which the child participates: informal neighborhood play groups, formal voluntary organizations and even schools. This was especially true of the parents who were interviewed in Canal Town, precisely because peer influences and safety were most problematic in that neighborhood. (This suggests, however, that some parents in Canal Town either did not share this view or were ineffective in acting on it.)

In these settings outside the home, what is most frequently problematic for parents, and what they feel they are most likely to be held accountable for, is their child's adherence to certain standards of moral behavior. These include: (1) showing respect for their peers, in the sense of refraining from activity which would cause harm to others; (2) showing respect for adults, especially those in positions of authority; (3) showing respect for private and public property, in the sense of refraining from stealing or destroying such property; and (4) making a good effort at whatever constructive activities they may be engaged in.

Parents believe that how their children behave outside the home is strongly influenced by the behavior of other people, especially peers, with whom they come in contact. The more other children in the neighborhood conform to the standards just described, the easier it is to ensure that their own children will do so. And children's behavior, in turn, is influenced by the presence or absence of parents, teachers and other adult authority figures and by their consistency (or lack of it) in upholding standards of behavior. As Thomas Green has so simply stated in a recent article in the American Journal of Education (1988), "moral education is best conducted in a world in which both the costs of virtue and the benefits of evil are slight", and thus "moral education is unlikely to succeed except in a morally good community."

Thus, a major parental responsibility can be summarized as managing the moral environment for their children when they are outside the home. Some parents used the term "environment" to describe what they were seeking, while others used a variety of similar terms: atmosphere, discipline, strictness, character, values, etc. Take, for example, the case of Ruth Ball (not her real name). Ruth was a single parent who had lived in Canal Town for most of her life. The first in her family to graduate from high school, she had high hopes for her son despite the fact that she herself, for various health reasons, had been unable to work steadily and was on and off welfare. While talking about events at the neighborhood school which eventually led her to transfer her son to another school, she commented, "Everything he does I try to check out ahead of time. Scouts. Football. Baseball. I go to all his games. They help him in growing up. They build his character." In spite of or because of her own employment problems, she wants to be sure that he will have a steady job when he grows up, and she praises and encourages his entrepreneurial flair. But she also makes him toe the line, keeping careful tabs on his whereabouts and practicing "tough love" when he gets in trouble. She once grounded him for three weeks for accepting the dare of another boy and shoplifting a cap gun in a department store. she feels that "It's hard to raise children in the city any more. You can do it, but it's tough." She would very much like to move out of the city, but finds it difficult when she lacks a steady income of any kind. In the meanwhile, she wants her son to attend a school which has the same standards of behavior and the same approach to discipline as she does.

Housing Choice and School Choice:

For most parents, managing the moral environment means first and foremost choosing a home in a "good" neighborhood with "good" schools. Families in four of the neighborhoods studied indicated they had acted on this basis, while those in Canal Town expressed a desire to do so but were constrained by their limited incomes. Tree-lined streets with attractive

homes are part of their conceptions of a good neighborhood, but less tangible factors also contribute in very significant ways. A good neighborhood is safe and secure, with other children for their children to play with and other parents who care about their children and share the same moral standards. A good neighborhood also has a variety of organized activities for children to participate in, in which parents are actively involved. Parents referred to such a neighborhood as being "very family-oriented" and promoting "a sense of community".

A good school, whatever else it might be, was conceived of as an integral part of such a neighborhood. It would be a school in which administrators and teachers shared the neighbor parents' views on standards of student behavior and consistently rewarded compliance with those standards while holding students accountable for any deviations. Parents would be welcome in such a school, and the building would be open after school hours for a variety of community activities.

Parents often make tacit assumptions that good neighborhoods will have good schools, with the result that if they like a neighborhood they may not check into the schools very carefully before purchasing or renting a home there.

Take, for example, the case of Marvin and Denise Lake, who were in the process of moving from The Village to another city when I interviewed them. Marvin was a successful business executive and Denise was an experienced teacher. Both were the first in their respective families to attend college, and both held education to be the key to success. But when it came time to move, the sequence of decisions was: (1) Marvin's job; (2) community; (3) home and (4) school. When asked whether their prior decisions had constrained their decisions about school enrollment, Marvin replied, "Not really. Certain kinds of community foster certain kinds of school. The better the socio-economic conditions of an area, the better the schools." Schools in more affluent neighborhoods, they believed, were not only better academically, they were also better at instilling the moral values they felt their children should acquire. (See also Maddaus (1987a))

Families who bought homes in Hilltop were often surprised when they later learned that the attendance area boundaries had been drawn in such a way that they were supposed to send their children to Eisenhower rather than Hoover. In some cases their reaction to finding their tacit assumption incorrect was expressed as anger at the city school district.

Catholic Schools:

Several Catholic parents commented that a Catholic parish and its school were an integral part of a good neighborhood. Religious education was seen as re-enforcing values which could be perceived as either religious or secular, most notably the values already listed above. Catholic parishes supported the closeknit character of good neighborhoods with their own networking and community-building activities. These parents used the term "neighborhood school" to refer to both Catholic and public schools. They felt they had a choice between two schools in a neighborhood, both of which could be relied on to be sensitive to their needs and values.

In neighborhoods in which these moral values were not consistently upheld by most parents, and/or in which social ties were weak and a sense of community lacking, Catholic parishes and schools offered places for participating families to meet their social and educational needs in a safe environment. In such neighborhoods, the differences in moral standards between public and Catholic schools were perceived to be greater than in good neighborhoods.

Indeed, this represents a major dilemma for Catholic education. Catholic parents living in "good" neighborhoods are more likely to be able to pay tuition to send their children to Catholic schools. But they also tend to see little difference in moral standards between the public and Catholic schools of their neighborhoods. As a result, they may decide between the two schools on the basis of other criteria on which Catholic schools are not likely to hold an advantage, such as availability of special programs and, of course, cost. As tuition costs have increased, families in The Village, but not in Hilltop, have transferred their children to public school.

On the other hand, Catholic parents in low income neighborhoods may see substantial differences in moral standards between the Catholic and public schools of their neighborhoods. But these parents generally lack sufficient income to pay tuition, and if their income rises they may use the additional income to move to a better neighborhood rather than to pay tuition for Catholic schools. Low income Catholics in this study were also less involved in their parishes, and therefore were less likely to be drawn to Catholic schools through contacts with other parents and school staff. They were also generally unaware of the tuition assistance that was available through the diocese.

Take, for example, the case of Paula Arch, a resident of Canal Town and a Catholic who attended church infrequently. Paula liked the pre-K and Kindergarten programs at Eisenhower school, but was critical of the school in other respects. She commented, "The kids aren't well behaved. They've had problems with first graders bringing in knives. They even had a child in pre-K who brought in a butter knife and said 'I have to bring a knife because my older brother does.' He'll be carrying a switchblade by the time he's in second grade!" Paula was considering enrolling her children in St. Maura's, a Catholic school in the neighborhood. She'd heard that "It's a good school. They have discipline. The kids aren't as rowdy as the kids at Eisenhower. They aren't as mouthy." She also believed that children from Canal Town who went to Catholic schools were more likely to graduate from high school and go to college. But Paula was also thinking of moving with her family outside the city. She thought the peer influences were more positive there. In short, a Catholic school was an attractive alternative as long as they lived in Canal Town, but if they could afford it they would probably move elsewhere and keep their children in public schools.

Cultural Diversity:

All parents interviewed shared the view that they were responsible for their children's welfare and that this required them to monitor the settings in which their children participated outside the home. However, a few parents placed relatively less emphasis on avoiding exposure to possible negative peer influences. And two of these parents suggested that exposing their children to other children of diverse backgrounds and cultures was more important.

Take, for example, the case of Molly Juno. Molly was a teacher in the city schools who had lived most of her life in various suburban communities but who felt a moral obligation to teach in the city. She felt that she had been "sheltered" by her parents, and that as an adult she "should be dealing with all different kinds of people." And, she added, "I want my kids to be able to deal with anyone who comes down the pike." When Molly and her family moved into a house in Parkside, she found that not everyone on her street was so pleased with the fact that "all races and classes live in this area". When she put an ad in the local newspaper looking for a babysitter, she was surprised at the response from her new neighbors. Several people called to tell her not to enroll her child at Eisenhower. "Someone said, 'Bad kids go there'. One even said, 'They bus kids in'. But I wanted a racially integrated school. They didn't say anything about Eisenhower academically." So she enrolled her oldest child in Eisenhower anyway. She kept in close touch with his teachers, and felt that some of the students were "hard workers" and "good role models for Lenny". And she kept him there despite the fact that one of his classmates "kept hitting him on the head for no reason" and "also pulled a knife on another kid".

Parental Strategies:

In summary, then, all parents shared the view that they were ultimately responsible for the welfare of their children and that this required them to select and monitor, to the extent possible, the settings in which their children participated outside the home. Within this overall framework, however, we can identify at least four different strategies which parents pursued with respect to school enrollment, three of which are based on the assumption that the moral environment is problematic and needs to be given high priority in parental decisions. The first three strategies are:

(1) Living in a good neighborhood with a good school: A substantial majority of the parents interviewed indicated that their perceptions of neighborhoods and schools had played some part in their decisions about where to live. And most of the parents who lived in Canal Town indicated that they would move to a better neighborhood if they could afford it. Moral values and standards of behavior played an important part in their views of the good neighborhood. Both public and Catholic schools were considered neighborhood schools and were viewed as acceptable options in good neighborhoods.

(2) Selecting a Catholic school to compensate for the limitations of a neighborhood: When a public school attendance area included substantial low income areas, it was considered less able to uphold standards of behavior than a Catholic school in the same area. Several parents chose Catholic schools for this reason, and others indicated that they would have if they had been able to afford it.

(3) Fighting it out: Several parents indicated that they were aware of the moral dangers to their children of living in a low income neighborhood. Whether by choice or by necessity, they would live there anyway, send their children to the neighborhood public school (or to other public schools), and do everything in their power to ensure that their values prevailed with their children regardless of the other influences to which they were exposed.

The fourth strategy was adopted by parents who viewed moral values as relatively less problematic but who placed a high value on cultural diversity.

(4) Selecting a school based on its cultural diversity: Two parents felt strongly that their children should be exposed to many different people so they would be better able to deal with differences in the future. These parents were more willing to send their children to public schools in low income neighborhoods until such time as their children clearly demonstrated that they couldn't cope with the situation there.

Explanation of Neighborhood Enrollment Patterns:

In this paper, I have emphasized the importance of the moral environment in parents' decisions regarding school enrollment. To be sure, parents employed other criteria as well, including academics, cost, religion, physical safety, transportation and coordination with child care arrangements. While various criteria were considered by various parents in various situations, some criteria were clearly more important and more problematic than others.

The way parents think about the moral environment has just been described. By returning to the elementary school enrollment patterns described earlier and shown in Table 1, I will seek to demonstrate just how important the moral environment is as an enrollment criterion.

The relatively high rate of enrollment of Canal Town children at Eisenhower was due in part to parents' positive perceptions of the pre-K and Kindergarten programs there. The convenience of being able to walk to school was also a consideration for those parents who did not have cars but wanted to be able to get to school in case of problems or in an emergency. Many parents were critical of the behavior of the children that they saw when they visited Eisenhower, and attributed this in part to the school's open classroom design, but felt that their alternatives were limited. A substantial proportion of families had positive attitudes toward Catholic schools, but relatively few could afford tuition. Voluntary transfer to other public schools offered an opportunity to get their children out of Eisenhower but racial balance requirements tended to limit their options to inner city schools. Several families sent their children to a magnet school.

Parkside and Hilltop were also located in the Eisenhower attendance area, but their enrollment patterns were very different from that of Canal Town. In both neighborhoods, a virtual consensus existed among parents (with Molly Juno one of the few dissenters) that while the immediate neighborhoods were safe, secure and conducive to child-rearing, the larger area served by Eisenhower, and thus the school itself, were not. Parkside begins only a block or two from Eisenhower, but all parents, including Molly Juno, agreed that it was a separate and distinct neighborhood from Canal Town. Most Catholic children in Parkside went to St. Maura's, which was also near-by, while non-Catholics generally found ways to transfer to other public schools. Despite difficulty with obtaining voluntary transfers, most found ways to get their children into public schools in middle income neighborhoods. No one in this study outside Canal Town sent their children to a magnet school.

Hilltop families were in a somewhat different position from those in Parkside, despite also being in the Eisenhower attendance area. They were actually closer to Hoover than to Eisenhower and thought of themselves as living in a part of The Village. They were frustrated and angry that the attendance area boundary had been drawn in a way that cut them off from Hoover, which they believed to be their neighborhood school. In past years, some had been able to obtain voluntary transfers to Hoover, but in the year this study was conducted Hoover was overcrowded and closed to white transfers unless the child in question had an older sibling already attending the school. One parent admitted to lying about the family's address to get their child into Hoover. For Catholic parents in Hilltop, St. Dorothy's school in The Village was another option, one requiring tuition but without the problem of attendance area boundaries. The very high rate of Catholic school attendance was a consequence of the absence of other options that would meet their moral environment standards. Instruction in religious beliefs and practices was at best a very secondary consideration in almost all cases.

Families in The Village felt that they had a choice between two neighborhood schools, Hoover and St. Dorothy's, both of which offered clear moral standards. Most of these families chose one or the other with little consideration of non-neighborhood schools. As tuition costs increased at St. Dorothy's, enrollment from The Village declined as parents shifted to Hoover. Hoover was viewed as a strong neighborhood school which also had the resources to finance special programs that St. Dorothy's could not offer.

The Acres was similar to The Village in that a high percentage of the children were enrolled in Truman, the neighborhood public school. Like parents in The Village, parents in The Acres saw nothing to be gained by sending their children to public school outside their neighborhood, and certainly no reason to send them to Eisenhower. Quite the contrary, they were very concerned about students from Eisenhower who attended the junior high in their neighborhood. Unlike The Village, The Acres has no Catholic school (or even church) so families opting for Catholic schools had to send them to schools in other, near-by, neighborhoods. Also unlike The Village, The Acres was less close-knit, so that Catholic parishes offered a sense of community not found in the immediate area where these families lived. The Acres was one of the most affluent neighborhoods in the city, and had a relatively high proportion of families with children in other private schools, including one in the neighborhood itself.

In summary, then, parents' perceptions of the moral environments of neighborhoods and schools, and of their available options in school enrollment, vary significantly from neighborhood to neighborhood, even within one section of one medium-sized city. And these differences have resulted in strikingly different neighborhood patterns with respect to elementary school enrollment.

Reinterpretation of Previous Studies:

As noted earlier, Rand Corporation researchers at Alum Rock found that parents cited location far more frequently than other factors in explaining their enrollment decisions. These researchers also dismissed location as being a "simplistic and educationally irrelevant" consideration, and attributed parent concern with such a consideration to inadequate

information about what constitutes quality education. They added that "no theory of learning that we know of would say that school location per se has an impact on learning".

I would argue, on the contrary, that there is such a theory of learning -- ecological theory -- and that parents are intuitively sensitive to its major concepts and act on the basis of them.

Ecological theory can be traced back at least to Kurt Lewin's formulation, in his book, A Dynamic Theory of Personality, published in 1935, that behavior evolves as a function of the interplay between person and environment. More recently, Urie Bronfenbrenner has elaborated on Lewin's formulation in his book, The Ecology of Human Development (1979), in which he stated that the development of a child can be viewed in terms of "the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded."

In other words, Bronfenbrenner's theoretical formulation focuses on relationships between individuals in face-to-face situations, on the relationships between such settings which are the consequence of people moving from one setting to another, and on the impact on such settings of major social institutions and of culture.

My own research, demonstrates the importance of focusing on families, neighborhoods and schools as learning environments. Parents' perceptions of the relationships between neighborhoods and schools illustrate the importance of examining relationships between settings. The constraints on parental choice represented by public school attendance area boundaries and rules governing voluntary transfer and by housing and employment opportunities illustrate the impacts of major institutions of society. And parental perceptions of the importance of moral values such as hard work, private property and respect for authority illustrate the influence of cultural norms.

Turning once again to the Rand study at Alum Rock, I believe that the Rand researchers overlooked two major characteristics of the area served by the Alum Rock Unified School District which should have been used to guide the design of their study and which, even with the design actually adopted, could have helped them to make better sense of their findings. First, they failed to take account of the fact that the district had a Mexican-American majority, in a larger society in which Mexican-Americans are a significant but largely "disadvantaged" (some would say "oppressed") minority. And second, they failed to take into account the data they possessed showing substantial differences between neighborhoods within the district with respect to ethnicity and parental education. In short, they largely ignored the social context in which parents made decisions about schools, choosing to deal with it only in terms of social status variables, or what Urie Bronfenbrenner has referred to as "people's social addresses".

While I am no expert on Mexican-American culture, I believe that am understanding of this culture would be important to drawing valid conclusions about parents' choices of schools in a community such as Alum Rock. Consider, for example, Alfredo Castaneda's (1974, cited in Sadker and Sadker, 1988) description of a traditional Mexican-American value orientation as including the following components:

- "a strong sense of identity with family, community and ethnic group";
- "an emphasis on interpersonal relationships and a commitment to helping others";
- "a respect for one's roles and responsibilities in the family and community"; and
- "an acceptance of Mexican Catholic ideology that stresses respect for authority and conventional beliefs".

With respect to the Alum Rock study of parental choice of school, I believe it would have been important to explore the extent to which the Mexican-American residents of the district held such beliefs or had assimilated to mainstream (Anglo) values. If differences in this regard were identified (and I believe it is likely they would, given the fact that some Mexican-American parents answered the parent questionnaires in English and others did so in Spanish), one might them have explored the ways in which differing beliefs would have had an influence on parents' choices of schools. But the use of a lengthy and highly structured questionnaire left parents little opportunity to express such beliefs in any coherent way, and the wording of two key questions made it even more difficult to interpret what parents really thought about school enrollment.

Ethnic and social status differences between neighborhoods within the Alum Rock district were clearly articulated in the first year report of the Rand study, but were not incorporated into the research design and data analysis. Weiler (1974) notes that local people make a distinction between "flatlands" and "hill" areas of the district, a distinction which is clearly reflected in school and census tract data. The percentage of "minority" (primarily Mexican-American) students enrolled at different schools within the district ranges from a high of 82% in two "flatlands" schools to a low of 33% in one "hill" school. Similarly, the percentage of adults 25 years or older who were high school graduates ranges from a low of 16% in one "flatlands" census tract to a high of 73% in one "hill" census tract. The fact that two distinct areas of the district were clearly perceived and labeled by residents, and that the labels correspond to ethnic and socio-economic as well as purely topographical differences, clearly suggests a need to gather and analyze data by small units ("flatlands" vs. "hill", school attendance area, neighborhood) as well as for the district as a whole. When one adds to this the fact that most of the voucher schools were in one of the two sections of the district -- the "flatlands" -- and not at all randomly distributed throughout the district, the case for such a neighborhood analysis becomes even more compelling. Such an analysis might also attempt to address the fact that adjacent school districts, which not incidentally were more Anglo and affluent, refused to participate with Alum Rock schools in a program of inter-district transfers.

One might guess, although evidence is lacking on this point, that some parents perceived certain neighborhoods and schools as better settings than others for preserving traditional Mexican-American values, whereas other parents evaluated these same schools and neighborhoods as environments for

preparing their children to participate in mainstream culture. In this district, these would most likely be the critical issues in the moral environment, suggesting that neighborhood contexts of schools would most likely be highly significant. Location, then, far from being "educationally irrelevant", would be of the utmost significance. Math may be math, in some sense, but the social context would have a great deal to do with what else was learned besides the content of the formal curriculum and even with how well the formal curriculum was learned.

The same general argument applies to the Minnesota study. One of the strengths of that study was that it did include a question about the significance of school quality in decisions regarding housing. But further analysis of the issue of location is lacking. The area studied includes urban, suburban, small town and rural areas within the Minneapolis-St. Paul Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA). Each of these areas would offer a different set of problems and opportunities for parents. To be sure, parents may have housing options among different types of communities, although that is not explored. In short, more micro level studies are needed to explore the concerns, opportunities and options that parents actually face. What we have instead is essentially an averaging out of parental concerns across a large area of a state, and an exploration of one institutional influence (state policy with respect to state income tax deductions for educational expenses) across an ill-defined range of specific contexts. For purposes of assessing this particular state policy, that might be sufficient. But if we really want to know what parents mean when they say that a particular consideration is "very important", we need to know more about their decisions in relation to their specific contexts.

Conclusions:

In summary, then, I find that "location" IS important to learning, including but by no means limited to moral learning. I believe that my study of the school choices made by Syracuse parents demonstrates the importance of doing additional studies that focus on the small neighborhood as the context for both child-rearing and parental decision-making regarding schools. I would strongly encourage further studies of this sort. One very high priority would be studies involving minority parents and neighborhoods, as my conclusions are based on a study of white parents in predominantly if not exclusively white neighborhoods. Another priority would be to focus on families in different neighborhoods with sharply contrasting responses to magnet schools, since few parents in any of the neighborhoods I studied took advantage of this option.

Implications for Parents, School Staff and Policy Makers:

If the preceding analysis is correct, then changes are needed in the ways that we think about families, neighborhoods, schools and school enrollment.

First, in the judgment of this researcher (who also happens to be a parent of two elementary school children), it seems very reasonable that parents should be concerned about the moral development of their children and should take reasonable steps to ensure that their children grow up with a commitment to certain moral values. Indeed, one might well consider

parents negligent to the extent that they fail to act on such concerns. Furthermore, raising children in a "good" neighborhood (morally speaking) appears to be one very reasonable strategy calculated to help achieve the desired result.

Second, however, I also believe that some sense of fairness with respect to people who differ from ourselves with regard to racial and social background should be included in the "bag of virtues", to use R. S. Peters' term (1973), that we profess, act on, and attempt to instill in our children. It is one thing to attempt to minimize our children's contacts with morally "bad" peers and to keep them out of environments where the adults present fail to clearly distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. It is quite another thing to make explicit or, more frequently, tacit assumptions about a possible relationship between race and/or family income on the one hand and moral behavior on the other, and to direct our children's lives based on such assumptions. Statistically speaking, there may be some element of truth in such assumptions. But as applied to any one individual, family or even neighborhood, there is a definite possibility that such assumptions are false and that acting on them constitutes an injustice. There is also a possibility that such assumptions may, over time, become self-fulfilling prophecies. The tendency of some parents to act on such general assumptions, rather than examining the specifics of a situation, suggests some basis for my concern, referred to at the beginning of this paper, that some parents may be acting on the basis of racial and/or class bias.

What is required, I believe, is a much more open and vigorous dialog among con concerned adults (and youth) in communities across the country with regard to what moral standards we as a society ought to uphold and how we can best teach them to our children. Also, as a society, we should be providing more support for parents and neighborhood leaders, as well as clergy and professionals in the education, social services and criminal justice systems who are attempting to deal with these complex and difficult issues in the context of day-to-day interactions with children and youth, especially in our "disadvantaged" communities.

And lest anyone doubt it, parents can make a contribution to this process. Most parents ARE concerned, even if they may not know how to express that concern in ways that educators and other professionals are likely to take note of. They do need to be invited in, to be full participants with professionals in the work of moral education.

As regards our urban school systems, low income families generally have fewer choices of schools than do middle and upper income families. Certainly some procedures could be devised that would be specifically designed to address this imbalance. This has already been done, however incompletely, in the area of pre-school education and day care, through the creation of Headstart, public school pre-Kindergarten programs and day care subsidies, all of which are limited to low income families.

But especially for those low income parents who are dissatisfied with their neighborhoods and neighborhood schools, I believe that providing the resources (human and material) to improve what exists may be appreciated as much as the opportunity to send their children elsewhere. What we need, then, is a more comprehensive approach to both neighborhood and neighborhood school improvement, conscious of the fact that especially in the moral domain the two are closely linked.

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Appendix A

Research Design:

This research study, conducted while I was a doctoral student at Syracuse University, focused on how (process) and why (criteria) parents enrolled their children in the elementary schools that they did.

The study was conducted in the City of Syracuse, New York, which has a population of approximately 160,000. Approximately 80% of the residents are white, 16% are black and 4% are other minorities. A majority of the city's residents are Catholic. Economically, Syracuse has a diversified economy, including industrial, financial, commercial, medical and educational sectors. The median family income in 1980 was about $16,500, distributed as follows: below $10,000 - 41%; $10,000-19,999 - 31%; $20,000-29,999 - 17%; and over $30,000 - 11%. Neighborhoods tend to be relatively homogeneous by both race and economic level.

During the late 1970's, the Syracuse City School District, which has a black enrollment of about 30%, successfully desegregated its elementary schools through a multifaceted program which included the use of voluntary transfers and two magnet schools featuring combinations of special curricular emphases, behavior codes and after-school child care. As a result, only about 50% of the city's elementary school aged children attend neighborhood public schools, while 30% attend other public schools. The remaining 20% attend private schools, most of them in fourteen Catholic schools, although several other private schools also operate in the city.

"Eisenhower" Elementary School serves an attendance area which includes three types of neighborhoods: lower middle income white, low income white and low income black. Nearby "Hoover" and "Truman" Elementary Schools serve predominantly middle and upper middle income white neighborhoods.

Within the attendance areas of these three public schools, five white neighborhoods were chosen for this study: "Canal Town", a low income neighborhood in the Eisenhower attendance area; "Parkside" and "Hilltop", two lower middle income neighborhoods also in the Eisenhower attendance area; "The Village" a middle income neighborhood in the Hoover attendance area; and "The Acres", an upper middle income neighborhood in the Truman attendance area (See Figure 1).

Neighborhood boundaries were determined using the following criteria: (1) public school attendance area boundaries; (2) physical features, such as major streets, commercial areas and parks; (3) significant differences in the size and quality of houses and house lots; and (4) perceptions of parents contacted during the survey of the initially defined areas. Thus defined, these neighborhoods were each relatively homogeneous in terms of family socio-economic status and school enrollment options, while maximizing differences in these respects between neighborhoods.

A door-to-door survey was conducted between May and July, 1984, in each of the selected neighborhoods. The purpose of the survey was to identify families who were currently in positions of transition or uncertainty with respect to elementary school enrollment. Every third household within each of the neighborhoods was contacted, with at least two return visits if necessary. Households were also contacted if children were seen in the yard or if there was evidence of the presence of children (e.g. age appropriate play equipment in yards or on porches, fire department "tot finder" stickers on windows). Each adult contacted was asked if they had a child in or about to enter elementary school, or if any of their immediate neighbors had such a child. All such referrals were followed up, with at least two return visits if necessary. Using this procedure, 180 families with elementary school aged children were identified, of which 161 agreed to complete a one-page survey form.

The survey form was developed solely for the purpose of identifying families to be interviewed. Thus, in addition to parents' names, addresses and telephone numbers, each parent was asked to identify, for each child in elementary school or entering elementary school that fall, the school (or pre-school, if any) of attendance in 1983-84, and any other schools that were considered for 1984-85.

Parents who were enrolling their children in different schools in 1984-85 than the ones they had attended in 1983-84, or who were even considering such a change, were approached for interviews. Interviews were also requested of parents who considered more than one option for Kindergarten enrollment in 1984-85. Fifty-four families were identified as meeting these criteria, but nine refused to be interviewed, while four others, after initially agreeing to interviews, cancelled appointments and could not be rescheduled, and two could not be recontacted following the survey.

Thirty-nine interviews were completed between May and August, 1984. Fifteen of these families had children entering Kindergarten, while twenty-six were making or considering changes for children already attending elementary school. Twelve of those interviewed lived in Canal Town, thirteen in Parkside and Hilltop, and fourteen in The Village and The Acres. Twenty-seven of the interviews were conducted with mothers only (five of whom were single parents), two were with fathers only (one was a single parent), and ten were with both parents. An effort was also made to interview black parents. A goal of fifteen interviews was established, and contacts were made with five community organizations serving black families. Regrettably, only five families were identified through these contacts. These interviews were conducted, but were not included in the analysis for this paper.

Initial interviews consisted of three major parts. First, parents were asked to explain how and why they enrolled their children in the schools that they did, beginning with the first school attended by the oldest child and continuing through the youngest child in or about to enter school. Numerous probes were asked to clarify each enrollment event. Second, various enrollment procedures were described, and parents were asked to comment on each such procedure. And third, parents were asked for family background data (family income, parents' levels of education, parents' occupations, religion and ethnicity). Initial interviews averaged a little over two hours, but ranged from half an hour to six hours in length.

Follow-up interviews were conducted with thirty-seven of these families between October 1984 and January 1985. Follow-up interviews consisted of six open-ended questions drawn from preliminary analysis of the initial interviews, plus final decisions on enrollment (in those cases in which the decision had been in doubt at the time of the initial interview) and parental satisfaction with the schools being attended. Follow-up interviews averaged about one hour in length.

Following the second round of interviews, detailed memos were written on the pairs of interviews for each of the families, in an effort to develop possible generalizations. These generalizations were compiled, along with possible confirming and disconfirming instances from the entire set of interviews. After further examination of the data, the dissertation was written, summarizing the evidence for the most significant generalizations and relating these findings to the findings of other research studies (see also Maddaus (1987b)).